An exploration of branding approaches in UK universities

Chris Chapleo*
Bournemouth University, Business School, Christchurch Hse, Talbot Campus, Bournemouth, Bournemouth BH88ES, United Kingdom

• *This exploratory paper considers the current state of UK HE branding, in particular, conceptualisations and approaches. It is driven by calls in the literature for clearer understanding and application of branding in Higher Education (HE).Objectives of the research, drawn from literature, were to explore conceptualisations of branding in the UK HE sector, as well as current challenges to branding concepts/ practice in UK HE. The methodology was based upon depth interviews with fifteen opinion leaders and opinion formers, specifically Heads of Marketing or External Relations in UK HE. Findings suggest that branding is a key issue for UK universities, but an overall conceptual model for brands in the HE sector remains challenging, although parallels with corporate branding are drawn. However, simplistic adoption of corporate branding does not offer a clear solution, and the requirement for a conceptual framework particular to the sector is evident. In exploring conceptual frameworks, experiential branding and internal branding are discussed as possible approaches that may offer a route for differentiation that universities seek. Whilst developing a clear conceptual model is the key challenge identified, limited and variable understanding of the branding concept and limited genuine differentiation around which to build a brand were also notable challenges. Overall, significant branding opportunities and challenges in a changing sector are discussed. Conclusions argue that corporate branding, experiential branding and internal branding literature all have a degree of applicability, but clearly further empirical work is needed to advance this important field.*
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Introduction

UK higher education (HE) has seen great change in recent years, perhaps most significantly, the introduction of student tuition fees. These have increased from introduction in 1998 to the lifting of the fees cap and a £9000 maximum for undergraduates by 2012. Governmental constraints are easing and a situation where universities with high brand value will be able to charge up to £20 000 per year in the future now seems conceivable (Petford, 2013).

*Correspondence to: Dr. C. Chapleo, Bournemouth University, Business School, Christchurch Hse, Talbot Campus, Bournemouth, Bournemouth BH88ES, United Kingdom.
E-mail: cchapleo@bournemouth.ac.uk

An investment of this magnitude engenders a consumer mentality and a corresponding shift in approach from universities, including the adoption of the language and practices of branding. This is not a straightforward process, however, and the particular qualities of HE have led to branding challenges that are often different to those in product marketing. Efforts to address these challenges have highlighted the limited conceptual models for understanding and managing brands in the specific HE context.

This exploratory research (based upon depth interviews, designed for deeper qualitative information and the corresponding narrative) was conceived to consider the current state of UK HE branding, in particular, conceptualisations and approaches. It is driven by calls in the literature for clearer understanding and application of branding in HE (Stride & Lee, 2007; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009; Iqbal *et al.,* 2012).

Objectives of the research were:

- To explore current/ future conceptualisations of branding in the UK HE sector.
- To explore current challenges to branding concepts and practice in UK HE.

Literature review

The UK higher education "Market"

The UK currently has 162 HE institutions; of these almost all are public institutions, which are government financed with only four that can be considered private institutions where the government does not subsidise the fees.

As outlined in the introduction, the UK higher education market has been (and continues) through a time of significant change. The 1990s saw a rapid expansion in numbers of students in UK universities. However public funding did not keep pace with this increase. This shortfall was addressed through a shift from government funding to fees for UK and EU undergraduate students, referred to as "tuition fees" as they do not include accommodation etc. This situation is not true of Scotland, however, where fees for home students have not been introduced, and Wales, where home students are subsided to a greater extent. The shift away from public funding has led to changing circumstances for different institutions; for some it has led to increased income, whilst for others income has fallen. Overall, however, the cuts in public funding mean that universities now rely on fee income and are directly in competition with each other. This has been contentious. A notable UK academic recently talked of the UK having too many universities, trying to do too many things and advocated consolidation and increased specialisation in the sector (Floud, 2014).

Brand in the education context

"Branding" can be a subjective term where "no one is talking about precisely the same thing" (Kapferer, 2001, p.3). However many writers (De Chernatony & McWilliam, 1990; Caldwell & Freire, 2004; de Chernatony, 2010) suggest brand definitions based on "emotional" and "rational" factors; indeed most definitions embrace this approach in some form (Hart & Murphy, 1998). Overall, a brand is "a multidimensional construct whereby managers augment products or services with values and this facilitates the process by which consumers confidently recognise and appreciate these values" (De Chernatony *et al.,* 1998, p.427).

Factors such as increased competition, a trend to differentiation and student fees driving "marketisation" have driven UK universities to adopt branding concepts and practices. However in 2001, Johnson argued that they had a long way to go in terms of incorporating the branding concept and, some thirteen years later, only partial progress has been made towards a culture and infrastructure within universities that truly understands and embraces effective branding. Branding has also made little mark on the HE marketing literature until recent times (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Bennett

et al., 2007), although the last few years have seen a steady increase in papers. The reluctance to embrace the topic may be partly as the debate on the desirability of a marketing culture within HE continues (Jevons, 2006), and it is therefore appropriate to begin with some discussion of the rationale for adopting branding within the sector, and to follow this with exploration of conceptualisations of branding that have a degree of relevance to HE. This research has a UK context, but convergence in global HE has made the discussion reasonably generalisable (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

Rationale for HE brand management

Branding was originally a technique to establish a product's name and to convey legitimacy and prestige, but this has evolved into the modern branding paradigm built upon abstraction and cultural engineering, where products embody consumer ideals and are only tenuously linked to functional benefits (Holt, 2002).

Jevons (2006) believes that branding is a shorthand measure for the whole range of criteria that constitute the quality of the university, whilst Bennett *et al.* (2007) suggest that higher education institutions (HEIs) require strong brands to enhance awareness of their existence and their course offerings and to differentiate themselves from rivals.

Arguments for applying the principles of branding to HE are therefore evident, but a debate on desirability continues. In reality, the nature of branding means that all universities have a brand by default, but whether these brands are actively embraced, managed and understood is anther matter. In many institutions the brand was traditionally seen as a visual identity, driven by tertiary communications. Understanding has largely moved beyond this to a more holistic view of brand, but this holistic view may not permeate throughout the organisation.

As current political and market forces make increasing competition in education inevitable, brands should be both a strategic asset and a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Caldwell & Coshall, 2002). However, a counter view is that branding may create a spirit of unhealthy competition, prompting expenditure that is of little benefit (Sargeant, 2005). Blumenthal and Bergstrom (2003), however, argue that branding can offer something "of substance" to help stakeholders differentiate between organisations, and should therefore be linked to an organisation's corporate and social responsibility. Branding also makes the consumer's choice process more effective (Doyle, 1989), and this alone could offer a rationale for branding's role in HE. The ideal conceptualisation of a brand as a clear shorthand for an organisation that consumers trust to deliver on their needs (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2005) could be argued to be desirable for universities as for all organisations. The investigation of brand building in universities therefore serves an important purpose: to help clarify conceptual assumptions and practical arguments in a sector that may struggle to implement overtly commercial approaches.

Particular qualities of branding in higher education

Building and maintaining strong brands are challenging in all sectors, but specific and unique issues face universities in their attempts to build and maintain brands. Brookes (2003, p.140) suggests that commercially focused activities such as branding are inherently difficult for universities where "one has to take into account the needs of departments that do not solely have commercial objectives".

The nature of marketing means that it permeates most areas of an organisation and therefore marketing people may run into the strongly held views of other staff and departments (Low & Fullerton, 1994). Cultural resistance to branding is therefore seemingly likely to be an issue for universities as underpinning marketing philosophies are "theoretically uncomfortable" for many academics (Brookes, 2003). Cultural context has an influence on how

staff implement brand values through social processes (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2005). Indeed, organisational culture may be a source of competitive advantage, but only when brand values are respectful of that culture and embrace it as part of their brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

A brand's identity should be consistent with employee's values and behaviour (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001), and internal brand building is integral to developing a successful brand (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2005). However in the university sector, cultural issues are likely to make this challenging, especially in committing internal stakeholders to branding concepts (Hankinson, 2001).

As discussed previously, articulating real differentiation is often a challenge. Accepted branding models such as Keller (2003) and Kapferer's "Brand Identity Prism" (Kapferer, 1992) argue that identification of a clear "brand principle" is important, but this may be difficult to encapsulate for university brands (Hankinson, 2001; Waeraas, 2008), particularly in terms of disparate stakeholders, internal organisation and diversity of service offerings.

Concepts of branding in higher education

Many HE institutions are increasingly managed in a similar manner to corporate brands (Kotler & Kotler, 1998; Whelan & Wohlfeil, 2006). Examination of the corporate branding literature reveals a degree of applicability for HE; a brand can benefit from going back to its roots and understanding its what makes it special (Aaker, 2004) and this can include heritage (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Innovation and quality are good values to act as drivers of corporate brands (Aaker, 2004). However, corporate branding requires a greater degree of sophistication than product branding in terms of organisational structure and culture that support the brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2003), and it is debatable whether some universities fully embrace this.

Although the purpose of branding is broadly similar in both product and corporate branding (Knox & Bickerton, 2003), the recognition of the importance of culture in corporate branding has particular parallels with branding in sectors other than product marketing (Kavaratzis, 2004) and resonates with HE. HE also demonstrates a high degree of intangibility and complexity; an area where corporate branding can bring a degree of focus (Simoes & Dibb, 2001). Aaker (2004) identifies the risk that too many corporate brands have no real value proposition and are simply large stable organisations with no point of distinction. This is a real challenge for universities who often talk of their overall brand, but may struggle to articulate real distinctiveness. This single holistic identity is a fundamental challenge for complex organisations such as universities, but it is argued that embracing a distinct assemblage of the characteristics of an institution (to draw from their diversity) may be a better way to conceptualise corporate brands for HEIs (Waeraas, 2008).

When seeking to assemble unique characteristics, it may be that emotional benefits can offer a basis for differentiation (Aaker, 2004), as many traditional corporate brands are initially based upon functional benefits. Ultimately, the corporate brands most likely to succeed are those that connect strategic vision and organisational culture (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

Overall, examination of the literature reveals that many areas of branding theory have some applicability for HE, but the sector's particular cultural, management and organisational issues mean that practical application is not straightforward or necessarily desirable. Academic writing has arguably not consistently kept pace with the rapid changes in HE marketing practice (Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009; Iqbal *et al.,* 2012). The call to better understand HE branding is therefore clear.

The theoretical framework that this paper draws upon is provided by a combination of the approaches discussed above, particularly the essential values of corporate branding, adapted to embrace the inherent complexity and diversity of universities

(Waeraas, 2008). Literature also suggests that experiential branding may be a possible differentiator. Discussion of interview content considered to what extent the characteristics of the above branding theories were evident in the narrative of respondents.

Methodology

It is appropriate to begin with an overview of "the market". There are several sub groups of institutions in UK HE, generally based around date of incorporation. The "student room" website defines these as "Ancient" (7 institutions incorporated before 1800), "Redbricks" (21 institutions incorporated before 1963), 1960s or Campus Unis (19 institutions incorporated in the 1960s), "New Unis" (44 institutions incorporated in or near to 1992, generally former Polytechnics), "Recently created" (16 institutions mostly incorporated since 2005), plus a small number of both "Unique Institutions " (e.g. Private Universities) and "University Colleges". Future research may seek to explore differences in these sub-sectors but this was not the basis of this work. Of the 162 HEIs, 55 are campus-based institutions (centralised on a site) but again, although some of the sample represent this group, no analysis has been undertaken based on this differentiation.

This exploratory work was suited to qualitative approaches that provide information of a "richer nature" (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Bryman & Bell, 2003). The methodology was therefore depth interviews with opinion leaders and opinion formers and is similar to that in other studies on brands (Hankinson, 2004). An interview guide was used to steer the discussion. Specifically, respondents were heads of marketing/ external relations in the UK HE sector, and interviews were carried out between February and July 2013. These respondents were selected as a group with whom some degree of brand ownership lies (Free, 1999). The sample of fifteen was appropriate for an exploratory study, and offered indicative results that are representative (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Sampling was through random snowball sampling and represented an approximate cross section of age/ type of institution as discussed previously.

Topics explored were directly drawn from the objectives and the literature and included: Current branding challenges in HE (Stride & Lee, 2007; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009; Iqbal *et al.,* 2012) and current/ future conceptualisations of branding in the UK HE sector (Waeraas, 2008; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009; Iqbal *et al.,* 2012). The average interview duration was 29 min. Careful transcription and coded content analysis was undertaken to exploit the particular benefits of qualitative data. The analysis was informed by the approach of Miles and Huberman (1994) where responses that demonstrated semantic similarity were attached to one of the defined dimensions derived from questions. A degree of paraphrasing was utilised to reduce the material whilst preserving the essential contents (Schilling, 2006). Coded analysis was checked by an independent researcher and the percentage of agreement calculated at 86%.

However, in order to encourage free and open interviews respondents were allowed to expand upon topics with a fair degree of flexibility, generating richer information (illustrated through quotes) than can bring qualitative data to life (Daymon & Holloway, 2004). They were also offered anonymity (as there was some discussion of sensitive marketing information) although this makes direct attribution of quotes difficult at anything more than a generic level.

Findings and discussion

The value and timeliness of this work were supported by interviewees, although branding has been on the agenda of university management and marketers alike for some time, it was considered an evolving and increasingly important field. Dialogue spanned the overlapping areas of branding and marketing. Obviously these two disciplines are not considered by authors or respondents as

interchangeable, but much formal brand related activity is underpinned by that of marketing and therefore a degree of freedom in how interviewees responded was embraced. As they were largely marketers by profession, they clearly relate to both of these terms and in these findings this is evident in, for example, mention of broader marketing challenges as part of branding implementation.

Current branding challenges

Interviewees were uniform in views that competition was increasing and HEIs have had to adopt a more competitive strategy. This competitive response is directly related to the need to secure good quality students, not only to acquire their income through fees, but also to maintain or enhance a reputation for academic excellence and integrate this in their brand.

This has also developed a debate around the concept of the student as service purchaser. Students have become "picky consumers" or "more demanding customers". This terminology has therefore meant that rather than universities relying on a student to choose to go into education as a sense of academic accomplishment or "for the joy of the academic experience", they are in fact questioning the return for them in choosing such an experience. As one interviewee suggested:

> "…all of our research and sector-wide research indicates that prospective students are acting much more as one would expect a buyer of any expensive commodity."

> "They're wanting to know upfront options for careers much more clearly [expressed] and getting guarantees of work placements and internships, which are becoming much more expected as part of the offering."

This changed mentality has focused the need to articulate the brand proposition of the university and the individual course to prospective applicants, although respondents discussed a familiar challenge in that a misconception persists (among some staff) that branding is just the logo or visual identity and they do not realise branding is "actually what we stand for, what we believe in, and it's why we're special and it's the thing that makes us who we are." This view was not uniform, however, and understanding of branding in a holistic sense was thought to be improving among many decision makers, albeit at varying pace.

Actually moving from understanding to articulating a brand is still a challenge, however. It was argued that money should be invested into developing brand values for the benefit of both students and staff; that is, staff need to "feel proud" to be working there and students studying there. It was suggested that this will generate positive discussions about the university and improve the brand "providing that the brand promise is delivered upon".

> "…universities that will suffer are the ones that aren't clear about what they are, want to be something that they're not, and are intellectually dishonest about who they are and what their prospects are".

This led to discussion of another key issue; the lack of genuine differentiation in the sector, where many brands developed over recent years have been "generic with a twist" and issues such as limited management discretion and control stifle product portfolio development. This, it was thought, had led to institutions having tried and failed in branding programmes where differentiation did not resonate with target audiences or was not wholly genuine.

Emerging branding concepts in higher education

Branding and reputation are conceived in the literature as distinct, and this was borne out by the views

of marketers, although the two are undoubtedly linked, as "a branding strategy should clearly communicate a reputation". Reputation is built over time whilst brand was considered more manageable; however one needs to accept that building up from a weak or poorly known brand to a strong established brand "is a slow and difficult process". It was felt that newer institutions have somewhat more flexibility to respond to the demands of the sector than their more established counterparts, as their reputation is not fully established. Newer institutions that have developed a marketing orientation over recent years have an advantage here as "older universities may be unable to respond competitively, confined by their brand constraints". As one interviewee suggested, "historic reputation is still important at the moment, but what will be interesting is to see whether that hierarchy changes over a period of time". It was also thought that branding through groupings was becoming quite important, e.g. "the Russell Group" of UK research based universities, which are starting to build a degree of equity outside those who work in HE.

Respondents suggested that there are particular branding implications for institutions located towards the bottom of the HE league tables. Specifically, if employability becomes a key differentiator, this could lead to a "step back to the binary divide…the potential for more vocational institutions which one might call polytechnics". Greater specialisation in fewer courses may replace a broad portfolio of course offerings for such institutions, resulting in rationalised operating costs and an increasingly focused recruitment drive.

The discourse elicited some interesting areas for consideration in terms of exploring applicable concepts of branding. Several interviewees talked with enthusiasm of the possibility of brands built on genuine differentiation through "emotional resonance". One respondent was strident in the opinion that universities have the possibility to build brands that have real "emotional registers" as "many sectors claim to change lives but universities actually do change people's lives. However, we have been conservative in actually going out and shouting about that in our branding". This is an idea supported in the literature (Lowrie, 2007).

Branding through a "promise delivered" needs to be understood and valued by those in the university and arguments were made that funding should be invested in campuses and student facilities as part of this; those aspects that will visibly create and indicate a positive student experience. This links to the possibilities of the emotional values of the brand echoes strongly with much literature on "experiential branding" (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Ponsonby-Mccabe & Boyle, 2006); as one interviewee articulated "looks at what consumers actually take out from the university experience rather than from the point of view of inputs as we have (too often)". It was suggested that work needs to be undertaken in this area to better understand how to identify and communicate a relevant experience identity.

The complexity and particular challenges of HE branding were widely discussed. The concept of corporate branding clearly had relevance to this discourse; whilst branding approaches draw on product branding, in that they "share the same objectives of creating differentiation and preference" (Knox & Bickerton, 2003), in HE there exists a greater level of intangibility, complexity and social accountability, that makes it more difficult to build and manage a coherent brand (Simoes & Dibb, 2001). The corporate branding literature suggests that culture is intrinsic to corporate values (Kavaratzis, 2004), and culture was a challenge of branding widely discussed by respondents. Defining and communicating the particular culture of a large and complex entity such as a university is undoubtedly a significant and core challenge in HE branding, but one that literature suggests should actually embrace the diversity of HEIs (Waeraas, 2008). The corporate branding literature therefore offers a good starting basis for conceptualising HE brands, especially when adapted to reflect the particular qualities of the sector. This draws upon adaptations suggested by Kavaratzis (2004) in work on city

brands, and it is suggested that the evidence in this research indicates that a corporate branding framework is a partially suitable initial model to conceptualise an HE brand, whilst an additional focus on experiential branding offers insights on differentiation within this framework.

Conclusions

Overall, branding remains a key for UK universities, but an overall conceptual model for brands in the HE sector remains challenging, although much of the discourse in interviews has resonance with theories of corporate branding (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Kavaratzis, 2004; Waeraas, 2008). However, simplistic adoption of corporate branding does not offer a clear solution, not least as respondents identified the difficulty of a succinct proposition that is truly distinct, given the complexity and diversity of HEIs. A suggested solution may be to embrace and incorporate the diversity into the brand values to form an overall identity that is truly distinct (Waeraas, 2008), but this would require a conceptual framework particular to the sector.

In exploring further ideas for this conceptual framework, the branded experience and experiential branding were suggested as possible approaches that may offer a route for the difficult and elusive differentiation that universities seek. Both the respondents and literature (Lowrie, 2007) suggest that universities have the basis for genuinely emotionally resonant brands as they can have a significant impact upon lives. Exploration and application of experiential branding models and theory are a second distinct area to emerge as offering possibilities, but needing further work.

The concept of internal branding also emerges as having resonance with challenges of modern HE branding; inconsistent staff understanding and articulation of brand ("living the brand") in the sector is increasingly addressed in practical terms and is beginning to emerge as a specific academic topic (Whisman, 2009).

Therefore, whilst developing a clear conceptual model appears to be the key challenge identified, limited and variable management/ staff understanding of the branding concept and limited genuine differentiation around which to build a brand were also notable.

Overall, the findings of this paper suggest that there are significant branding opportunities and challenges in a changing sector. Greatest of these is a clear framework for the conceptualisation, analysis and management of brands in the very specific HE context. Corporate branding, experiential branding and internal branding literature all have a degree of applicability but clearly further empirical work is needed to advance this important field.

Implications for practitioners

It is suggested in this work was that the theory and practice of corporate branding have much to offer HEIs in understanding and analysing their brands, but that consideration should be given by practitioners on how to embrace and communicate the diversity of the organisation. Consideration of the experiential elements of the brand may have a basis for differentiation within this.

The theory of branding is generally consistent in breaking down brands into functional and symbolic benefits. These are communicated through a great variety of encounters, which have functional and symbolic meaning (Kavaratzis, 2004) and are projected through three distinct communication strategies that may offer a useful framework for practitioners to analyse and manage brands:

(1) Primary communication: this refers to the communicative effect of a university's actions, when communications is not the primary focus of these actions. This includes infrastructure and campus projects, administrative structure and behaviours such as academic services and university leader's actions and vision. It is this element that has not been wholly embraced as

part of brand and therefore where future focus may add significant value.

(2) Secondary communication: the formal and intended communications that commonly take place through well known marketing practices (advertising, public relations, graphic design etc.)

(3) Tertiary communication: this refers to word of mouth reinforced by media and competitors. Although the public relations function aims to manage this, it is not controllable by the university as it may originate from diverse stakeholders including students. Much online communication and social media, whilst arguably intended in secondary communication, often overlaps this category. This and the previous category have previously formed the basis of the default (NB intentional or otherwise) branding focus of universities and whilst obviously they remain key, integration with strategy 1 above may offer a basis for a more cohesive brand.

Future research

This was exploratory research, and, as is its intention, several areas emerge that are worthy of further empirical investigation. Particularly key is understanding the applicability of an adapted and bespoke version of corporate branding concepts and testing these, as well as aspects of experiential branding could lead to a conceptual model of genuine academic and practical value. It is also suggested that variables such as type/age of institution, campus type etc. are incorporated in further work.

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